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Nonresident family as a motive for migration

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Published in:
Demographic Research

DOI:
[10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.13](https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.13)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Gillespie, B. J., & Mulder, C. H. (2020). Nonresident family as a motive for migration. *Demographic Research*, 42, 399-410. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.13>

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DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

VOLUME 42, ARTICLE 13, PAGES 399–410

PUBLISHED 26 FEBRUARY 2020

<https://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol42/13/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.13

Descriptive Finding

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Nonresident family as a motive for migration

Brian Joseph Gillespie¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

A great deal of research has focused on employment and educational reasons for migration. Recent research has also begun to explore social motives. However, we still know very little about the role of nonresident family for moving, especially over long distances.

OBJECTIVE

We examine (1) the prevalence of nonresident family as a primary motive versus a secondary and location-based motive for migration, (2) moving away from family versus moving toward family, (3) how individuals' reported family motives correspond to their actual migration toward family members, and (4) the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals who report family as a motive for migration.

METHODS

The data were derived from the Swedish Motives for Moving survey, which is based on an analytic sample of 4,601 Swedish respondents who migrated at least 20 km in 2007. We present descriptive statistics and quotes to illustrate respondents' reports of their migration motives. As a tool for sophisticated description, we also provide the results of logistic and ordered logistic regression models of mentioning nonresident family as a motive for moving.

CONTRIBUTION

Common assumptions that internal migration is related to employment and education underestimate the importance of family as a motive. Moreover, nonresident family is among the secondary and location-based considerations for many more migrants than data on only primary motives might suggest. Reports of migration toward family are far more common than reports of migration away from family. We provide support for the assumption underlying previous work that moves toward family are indeed motivated

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by family considerations and not just a by-product of other considerations. Sociodemographic characteristics associated with reporting nonresident family are in line with expectations based on prior research and theory.

1. Introduction and background

Researchers often infer that long-distance moves within countries (also referred to as internal migration) are undertaken for employment and educational reasons. However, survey research indicates that a large proportion of those who move long distances do so for social reasons (Morrison and Clark 2011; Niedomysl 2011). In fact, a recent comparison of migration in three countries found that individuals cited resident and nonresident family as important reasons for migration regardless of the distance moved (Thomas, Gillespie, and Lomax 2019). Although the importance of family for international migration is well-documented (e.g., Boyd 1989), we still know very little about the role of nonresident family for internal migration, including the characteristics of individuals who report nonresident family as their motive for moving.

A small but recently growing number of studies have examined nonresident family as push and pull factors for internal migration. Among them, Smits (2010) showed how life-course events inspire moves closer to family. In particular, adult children getting divorced or having a recent first birth have a higher likelihood of moving close to parents. Ermisch and Mulder (2019) found that living far away from parents increased children's likelihood of long-distance migration. Additionally, Spring et al. (2017) found that nonresident family influenced individuals' likelihood of moving as well as their selection of a new destination. Broadly, these studies underscore nonresident family as important for migration, especially since moving for noneconomic reasons, including family, can lead to positive labor market outcomes for migrants (Clark and Maas 2015).

Because of limitations in the data landscape, other studies on the topic have used relocations closer to family to infer that a family-related move has taken place (e.g., Pettersson and Malmberg 2009). Yet, the assumption that moves closer to family are motivated by family considerations has not been tested. It might be that migrants move for other reasons (e.g., return migration closer to friends or to a familiar environment). One way to test whether moves toward family are linked to respondents' motives is to compare individuals' distance from their family before and after moving with actual reports of their motives for moving.

We identify nonresident family as an important resource that motivates individuals to migrate to specific locations. Using survey data on primary and subsequent

(secondary; location-based) motives from internal migrants in Sweden aged 18–74 ($N = 4,909$), we explore nonresident family as a motive for moving. In particular, we examine (1) the prevalence of nonresident family as a primary motive versus a secondary and location-based motive, (2) moving away from family versus moving toward family, (3) how individuals' reported family motives correspond to their actual migration toward family, and (4) the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals who report family as a motive for migration. Within the context of family-based motives, we also explore the importance of friends in individuals' decision to migrate, insofar as it differs from the importance of nonresident family, who are often thought to be more important in social networks and particularly in support exchange (Rossi and Rossi 1990).

Several broad expectations frame our study, rooted in theoretical perspectives on gender roles and the life course. Because women tend to attach more importance to family than men (Rossi and Rossi 1990), we expect women to be more likely than men to mention family motives for migrating. We also expect situations associated with support needs to play a role: low income, unemployment, divorce, and widowhood, but also having children in the household (compare Smits's [2010] findings from a study of moving close to parents and adult children). Furthermore, retirement represents a situation in which people are "freed up" from work obligations and migration motives could be related to moving closer to children and grandchildren.

2. Data, measures, and methods

The data were derived from the postal survey Swedish Motives for Moving (see Niedomysl and Malmberg 2009; Niedomysl 2011). They are based on a sample of 10,000 migrants in 2007 from the population of 244,704 migrants who had moved at least 20 km in the prior year, derived from the Swedish population register. The survey, which was implemented in collaboration with Statistics Sweden, was designed to tap into household-level migration experiences in Sweden, including migration motivations, the importance of several factors for moving (e.g., family and friends), employment status, and demographic characteristics. The sample was stratified by gender, age (four groups between 18 and 74 years old), and migration distance (four categories). After two reminders, 4,909 migrants returned completed questionnaires. With the use of sampling weights, we controlled in the best possible way for the disproportionate representation of certain demographic characteristics. In terms of the representativeness of the sample, males were less likely than females to complete the survey, younger men and women were less likely than older, foreign-born individuals were less likely than native-born, the unmarried were less likely than other marital

groups, and lower-income respondents were less likely than higher income. The sample weights were designed by Statistics Sweden in order to correct for these unequal representations. Owing to 308 cases lost through listwise deletion, the final models are based on an analytic sample of 4,601 individuals, with the generalizability of results improved through the use of the sampling weights. Data from the Swedish population register at the time of the survey were matched to the survey data on an individual level. From the register data, we derived information about the distance of the move, proximity to family before and after moving, household income, and immigrant status.

Measures of motives for moving. The analyses are based on responses to three open-ended items in the survey, designed to capture individuals' migration motives. The first free-response question (Q1) asked: "What was the most important reason for your move?" A second question (Q2) asked respondents "Were there also other important reasons for you moving?" Those who selected yes were asked, "which ones?" A follow-up later in the survey asked, "Was there any particular reason you moved to this specific place/region?" Another question asked about motives for migrating "from this specific place/region?," but the answers were frequently vague, and the remarks indicated this item was often misunderstood so we did not use it in our analyses. However, we did use the item to assess how frequently respondents reported moving to get away from family and friends. An additional closed-ended measure asked individuals, "How important were the following factors for your decision to move...?" "Being close to relatives" and "Being close to friends" were among the 12 items listed, with response options ranging from (0) "Not important" to (4) "Extremely important."

Measures of other characteristics of the respondents. We use information on the respondents' gender, age, immigrant status (whether Swedish-born), highest completed level of education (elementary school, high school, some college, college or more), income in 10,000s of Swedish crowns, whether children were living in the respondents' household, and marital status (unmarried, married, divorced, widowed). All characteristics were measured before the respondent migrated. We furthermore used information on migration distance, and on distance to parents and children before and after the move derived from geocoded population register data. Descriptive statistics of the variables of interest are provided in Table 1.

Methods. In addition to descriptive statistics and quotes to illustrate what respondents reported, we present logistic and ordered logistic regression models of mentioning nonresident family and friends as a motive for migration as a tool for sophisticated description.

Table 1: Sample characteristics: Mean (SD) or percentage

Female	55.7
Age	44.3 (17.8)
Immigrant	12.2
Highest education level	
Elementary school	22.5
High school	33.5
Some college	14.4
College or more	29.7
Employment status	
Employed	55.1
Student	15.2
Retired	19.3
Unemployed	10.5
Income in 2005 (10,000s)	17.1 (19.5)
Children in household	21.1
Marital status	
Unmarried	44.7
Married	34.1
Divorced	16.6
Widowed	4.6
Migration distance in km (Median = 57)	111.4 (150.4)
Premigration: All family > 50 km	28.2
Postmigration proximity to family	
All family > 50 km	35.1
Family 20–49 km	18.3
Family 6–19 km	7.7
Family 2–5 km	5.8
Family 0–2 km	33.1
Migration motives	
Family as primary reason	6.8
Friends as primary reason	0.8
Any family reason (across all questions)	23.0
Any friend reason	11.5
Importance of being close to relatives (Range: 0–4)	1.6 (1.4)
Importance of being close to friends (Range: 0–4)	1.5 (1.3)

Note: Unimputed and unweighted data.

3. Findings

Prevalence. The share of individuals reporting nonresident family as a *primary* reason for migrating was not inconsequential – around 7%. A much larger share of individuals reported nonresident family when asked about *secondary* and *location-based* motives. In total, no less than 23% mentioned it as any motive. Of those who mentioned nonresident family, 38% reported it as their primary motive, 31% identified family as a secondary motive, and 31% as a motive for choosing a specific destination. Compared with reporting family, the prevalence of reporting friends as a reason for moving was considerably lower. Only 40 individuals (less than 1%) reported friends as their primary motive for migrating; 11.5% mentioned friends as any motive. As expected, we found a strong association between reporting friends and reporting family. Among those reporting family, 27% also mentioned friends, and among those reporting friends, 54% also mentioned family [$\chi^2(1) = 355, p = .000$, Cramér's $V = .27$].

Moving toward versus away from family. While nonresident family might be a draw to move closer, family relationships might also be a reason to move *away*. However, this was seldom reported in open-ended responses. In fact, fewer than ten individuals in the sample explicitly mentioned getting away from family among their reasons for migrating. One respondent reported their primary reason for moving was “to get away from parents.” Two others reported family avoidance among their secondary migration motives: “Found a nice house that both of us were comfortable in. Avoided parents” and “To find work and also avoid the conflict among my relatives.” One explanation why moving *away* from family is reported infrequently could be that moves away from family are usually motivated by considerations unrelated to avoiding family, such as education, work, independence, or partnership formation. Motives to move away might also be perceived as personal and/or sensitive, such as escaping domestic violence (Bowstead 2015). This was implied in only two responses: “violence at home” and “My parents are abusers so I wanted to get away from that atmosphere.” More frequently, individuals reported moving to get away from an ex-partner – for example: “Became a grandmother. And to get away from the ex,” “Needed to get distance from my former husband,” “My former partner made it impossible to keep working at our mutual workplace.” By contrast, no respondents explicitly reported moving away from friends as a reason for their migration.

Reporting family and moving close to family. Among those who lived over 50 km from their closest child or parent before the move and within 20 km afterwards, 54% mentioned family as a motive. There is a relationship between moving closer to family and reporting family as any [$\chi^2(4) = 220, p = .000, V = .42$] or the primary motive for moving [$\chi^2(4) = 105, p = .000, V = .29$]. Although this implies, as one would expect, that family motives are reported more frequently by those moving closer

to family than by those remaining at a long distance, the relationship between post-migration distance to family and the likelihood of mentioning family motives was not monotone: at the shortest distance, this likelihood was smaller than at 3–5 km distance. The data do not allow us to distinguish between moving very close and moving into the same residence, but one might speculate that some of those who move in with family might not explicitly mention family, for example because it is too obvious.

Sociodemographic characteristics of individuals reporting family and friends as a migration motive. Table 2 presents the results of logistic regression exploring relationships between the covariates and reporting family for any reason (Model 2.1) and family as the primary reason (Model 2.2) for migration. Model 2.3 is an ordered logistic regression for individuals' forced-choice reports on the importance of "being close to relatives" for their decision to migrate. Models 2.4 and 2.5 are similar to Models 2.1 and 2.3, respectively, but with reports for friends as the "outcome." We do not present a model for reports of friends as the *primary* reason for migration since so few individuals actually reported it.

For Model 2.1, the likelihood of mentioning any nonresident family motive increases with age and is higher for women, students, retired people, those with children, and the widowed. The results in Model 2.2 indicate that being married or divorced is associated with a higher likelihood of reporting family as a *primary* reason for migration when compared to the unmarried. The results of Model 2.3 (importance of being close to relatives) more closely mirror those of Model 2.1 (reporting family as any motive for moving) than Model 2.2.

Some of the results for friend-based motives (Models 2.4 and 2.5) differed from those for nonresident family. The results in Model 2.4 indicate that friend-based motives for migration decrease with age. There was no evidence of a gender difference in reporting friends as a reason for migration. Students are less likely to report friends than employed people and those who are married are less likely to report friends than the unmarried. The results of Model 2.5 point to a lower likelihood of reporting friend-related motives among those with children. Similar to the results for nonresident family motives, retired respondents are more likely to mention friends than employed individuals.

Table 2: Characteristics for reporting family and friends as motives for migration ($N = 4,601$)

Family motives				Friend motives						
	2.1 (Any)	p	2.2 (Prim.)	p	2.3 (Imp.)	p	2.4 (Any)	p	2.5 (Imp.)	p
Age	1.01	.017	1.02	.046	1.00	.497	0.98	.002	0.98	.000
Female	1.37	.006	0.96	.832	1.40	.000	0.94	.619	1.09	.275
Immigrant	0.79	.179	1.61	.076	0.92	.506	0.80	.355	0.83	.162
Highest education										
LT high school (Ref.)										
High school	0.90	.575	1.48	.111	0.99	.943	1.10	.747	0.91	.448
Some college	0.99	.959	1.77	.054	1.00	.979	1.33	.341	1.12	.419
College or more	1.23	.248	1.25	.359	1.29	.060	1.47	.157	1.09	.505
Employment status										
Employed (Ref.)										
Student	1.46	.020	1.11	.771	1.08	.502	0.62	.009	0.86	.206
Retired	1.54	.005	2.09	.001	1.62	.002	1.68	.037	1.59	.001
Unemployed	1.33	.084	1.43	.227	1.45	.003	0.69	.103	1.16	.192
Income in 2005	1.00	.349	1.00	.783	1.00	.241	1.00	.395	1.01	.050
Any children	1.40	.008	1.62	.050	1.08	.440	1.01	.960	0.84	.041
Marital status										
Unmarried (Ref.)										
Married	1.35	.076	2.91	.003	1.22	.100	0.67	.049	0.78	.024
Divorced	1.29	.166	1.99	.051	1.04	.798	0.75	.212	0.82	.819
Widowed	1.83	.027	2.73	.034	1.70	.019	1.12	.779	1.18	.447

Notes: Weighted and unimputed data. Models 2.1, 2.2, and 2.4 are based on logistic regression. Models 2.3 and 2.5 are based on ordered logistic regression.

Prim. = Primary Motive; Imp. = Importance of Motive

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings suggest that common assumptions that internal migration is related to employment and education underestimate the importance of family. Moreover, if respondents are prompted to mention more than one migration motive, many do, and nonresident family is among the considerations for many more migrants than data on only primary motives might suggest. Additionally, reports of migration toward family are far more common than reports of migration away from family. This difference in reporting frequency suggests that nonresident family is much more an attraction factor for migration than a repellent – although it may also have to do with reluctance to give answers that suggest unpleasant reasons for moving.

The fact that so few respondents mention friends as a motive for moving, particularly as the primary motive, when compared with nonresident family is noteworthy. First, the discrepancy suggests that friends might be less important than family in location choices or individuals' social networks more generally. It might also reflect the different roles, values, and meanings of family versus friends in individuals' lives – for example, the more important role of family in support exchange. Furthermore, family relationships are fixed and can draw people to specific geographic areas, while friendships can be developed in new places. We found an association between reporting family and reporting friends, which suggests there might be some overlap between networks, likely increasing individuals' propensity to move to areas where both reside.

We tested the relationship between reports of moving for nonresident family and actual movement closer to parents/children. In the absence of data on individuals' stated motives for moving, relocations closer to family likely serve as a reasonably valid proxy of nonresident family-inspired migration.

We also identified some characteristics of individuals who reported nonresident family reasons for migration. These findings were mostly in line with the expectations summarized in the Background section. Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, the differences between family-motivated and friends-motivated moves might be linked to shifts in the importance of family and friends throughout the life course (see, for example, Gillespie et al. 2015). Married individuals and those with children might attach particular importance to family proximity. Conversely, young adults, especially students, are in a phase of making new friends rather than moving toward existing ones. For retired people, moves for employment are naturally implausible and one would expect to see more moves toward family and friends than among the employed. The gendered results for reporting any family motive are in line with ideas in the literature on the greater importance of family in women's than men's lives (Rossi and Rossi 1990). However, these results might also reflect that women in Sweden tend to live

farther from their families (Malmberg and Pettersson 2007), and therefore have a higher likelihood of being a family-motivated mover in the first place.

The results from closed-ended questions on the importance of moving close to friends/family resemble those from the models based on open-ended questions about any reasons. This might imply that information from survey questions about the importance of certain factors in migration decisions approximates information derived from the more spontaneous answers respondents give to open-ended questions. However, it is also possible that respondents adjusted their answers to the open-ended questions after having been prompted to think about the importance of these factors.

There are several limitations to the survey and data. First, even though we used sample weights, we cannot be sure that they fully correct for discrepancies between the sample and full population. Further, we do not have distance information on nonresident family other than parents and children, although individuals might also move toward siblings and grandparents. Neither could we observe whether respondents moved closer to friends. Insofar as those data exist, it would be an interesting question for future research.

5. Acknowledgments

The authors thank Thomas Niedomysl for access to the data. This article is based on the FamilyTies project, which is funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant 740113).

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